

THE  
Real Greatness of Abraham Lincoln

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SPEECH  
OF  
HAMPTON L. CARSON, ESQ.,  
IN  
RESPONSE TO A TOAST AT THE ANNUAL DINNER OF THE  
UNION LEAGUE OF PHILADELPHIA,

February 13, 1899.



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Abraham Lincoln. ❁



HAMPTON L. CARSON, ESQ., responded :

*Mr. President and Members of the Union League :*

I consider it a distinguished honor to be called upon, on this occasion, to respond to this toast. Much of what I might have said has been most exquisitely and fittingly said by you, Mr. President, in the few but happy and expressive words which you have used in describing the character of Abraham Lincoln. I can do little but add to what you have said.

For some fifteen years or more I have been a diligent collector of the engraved portraits of all the great men who have taken part in the making and development of America since the time of Columbus. I think it is safe to say that there are 30,000 pieces in that collection ; pictures of statesmen, Presidents, explorers, bankers, lawyers, merchants, manufacturers—all those who have assisted in building up the mighty buttresses of our institutions, and who led in every needed reform or in the extension of a useful movement. Of Mr. Lincoln I have at least one hundred different pictures ; and it is not too much to say that the most dignified, the most thoughtful, the most rugged, as well as the saddest face in the vast army of leaders is his. A gaunt, tall form ; a firm-set head, with beet-

ling brows, and "eyes from which the soul of an immortal sorrow looks"; a spirit baptized in that rain of blood which drenched the sod and the forests of the Southern States until his heart grew sick with grief; a spirit which embodied the woe of Lear and the tragedy of Hamlet, and which would have broken beneath the weight had it not been enlivened by enjoyment of the humor of the Merry Wives of Windsor and the merriment of the Midsummer Night's Dream. I never look at those pictures without recalling two scenes of April, 1865. I was but a boy of thirteen, but if I live to be ninety and nine, unless my faculties decay, I can never lose the memory of them. The old city of Philadelphia, by night, was indeed dark and dismal; here and there was a straggling gas-lamp, everywhere badly paved streets, made more gloomy by the tightly closed front shutters, through which not a single hospitable gleam shot out from any parlor on the sidewalk—a drearier or more depressing scene I can not recall. And yet one night I remember when every house from the Schuylkill to the Delaware, and from League Island to Germantown, was ablaze with light; flags were afloat upon the joyous breeze; the ground resounded beneath the tread of multitudes who shouted in triumph; troops of happy boys, of which I was one, ran up and down the streets, singing "Rally 'round the flag, boys," "Marching through Georgia," or "We'll hang Jeff Davis on a sour



apple tree"; the solid earth quivered with a joyous palpitation which indicated, by a strange, subterranean murmur, that the feelings of the nation, so long pent up, had found a voice in exultation over the surrender of Lee, and the conviction that at last there was full assurance that this Union was, and should remain for all time, "an indissoluble Union of indestructible States." In a few days that scene had changed. I recollect the State House wreathed in black; every block of buildings was draped in sable; every house stood with shutters bowed; every man, with pallid face, whispered to his neighbors; women spoke in convulsive sobs; children ceased their play, hushed and awe-stricken; every officer on the street had crape upon his arm, or wore the rosette of mourning; our daily newspapers were bordered with broad, black bands; there was a suffocating grief in the air which, as a child, I felt but could not explain. Was it because the President of the United States was dead? Was it because our victory had been shorn of its fulfilment by the loss of our leader? No; it was because the greatest soul of the nineteenth century had passed from earth to immortality.

What was the secret of this man's greatness? Ah! what is the secret of the strength of iron, of the tenacity of steel, of the fiber of the oak? You must answer, It is a secret of the eternal hills; it is a

riddle of the elements, a mystery connected with those dim, far-distant times when raw material was shaped in the womb of the mountains. The secret of Abraham Lincoln's greatness must be sought for in the evolution of family isolation, in the struggle with primeval forces, in a life spent in the loneliness of untrodden forests ; in a state of society when men had no strong nation at their backs to sustain them in their rights, when they had to hew out for themselves a solution of every problem in their grapple with a harsh condition of life, and in conflict with a savage foe which still hung upon the borders of the wilderness.

Lincoln could trace his forefathers back for six generations to respectable ancestry—Charles Lincoln, I think it was, who came from Norwich to Hingham, Mass., his descendants coming into Berks County, Pa., removing into Virginia ; and then the grandfather, who was a co-pioneer with Daniel Boone, pushing into old Kentucky—but the sad fact must be told : his father was a luckless rover, a miserable squatter, moving about from State to State in a vain search for the acquisition of property. He went from Kentucky to Indiana, and from Indiana to Illinois. His mother, —what matters it that she knew not whence she came?—is it not immortality for her womanhood to have been the mother of Abraham Lincoln ?

A boyhood spent amid squalid, poverty-stricken,

coarse, low, ignorant surroundings; in a half-faced cabin scarcely as snug as the winter cavern of a bear; and yet the seed of that immortal spirit, planted in such a soil, nurtured by such surroundings, was developed by adversity into a noble growth. No other President of the United States ever sprang from so lowly an origin,—nay, from such a pit. It is a familiar story in America for men to rise from poverty to the White House; it is a familiar story to trace the barefooted boy through the various positions of clerk, storekeeper, member of the Legislature, member of Congress, to high position in the Cabinet or in the White House; but the fact that he became President is not the crowning feature of his career. It is true he had but one year's schooling in all his life; it is true that as a backwoodsman he split rails for Nancy Miller, at the rate of four hundred for every yard of jean cloth, stained in walnut-juice, for a pair of trousers, as his price; it is true that as a flat-boatman he floated down the broad waters of the Illinois to the Ohio, and from the Ohio to the Mississippi; and that there, on some Southern wharf, he beheld a scene of the slave-market which first drove the iron into his soul. He recorded no vow like that of Hannibal at the altar, but between clenched teeth he muttered, "If it ever comes within my power to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard."

A surveyor; a postmaster, with his office in his

hat a member of the Legislature without great distinction, but active in securing the removal of the capital of the State from Vandalia to Springfield; a member of Congress without attracting particular attention; finally working out for himself the problems that revolved before his mind; thinking, as the man who knew him best once said, more than any other man in America ever thought, and reading less, because books were few and opportunities for thought were many,—thinking, as he rode upon his horse across the broad prairie, where the quail whistled to its mate and the red deer sprang from the ripened grass beside his path,—thinking of those mysterious problems as to the meaning of this Government, as to its powers and as to whether slavery could constitutionally be excluded from the territories,—he finally worked out the answer, and in the discussions which led to their settlement achieved distinction by dint of his own inherent force of character, his conscientiousness, his courage, his intelligence, and his commanding position on the hustings. He rose so steadily and so loftily that he was at last in a position, when the Douglas debate gave him an opportunity to enter upon a death-grapple with the hateful wrong, in an argument which attracted attention in all parts of the country, and drew the eyes of all men to the Illinois campaign for senator, in which he routed the ‘Little Giant,’ and as a Rupert of Debate became immortal.

Had his career stopped there, we would still say, "There is nothing so extraordinary in this"; but he had not yet reached the full measure of his stature. In the great conflict that followed he appeared at the Cooper Institute, and delivered a speech which made his reputation national, and then for the first time there flashed throughout the great, loyal, struggling region of the North a conviction that the bold declaration which had caused his defeat as a senator of the United States had made him a possible candidate for the Presidency: "A house divided against itself can not stand; this country can not remain half-slave and half-free; I do not expect to see the Union dissolved, but I do expect to see it become wholly one or the other." Time proved that he was right.

The gentlemen who were instrumental in forming this League remember well what the feeling was when it was announced that Abraham Lincoln, of Illinois, and not William H. Seward, of New York, had been nominated by the Chicago Convention for the Presidency of the United States. Did any student of our history, familiar with the names and deeds of our former statesmen, make mention of him as a probable great leader? Was there any prophet among the statesmen of his day who foresaw either what he would accomplish or what he might be called upon to accomplish? This "mast-fed lawyer," as he was called; this "Illinois ape"; this "half-horse, half-alli-

gator"; this man "reared on the muck of the prairies"; this man "who tells a story when other men are grave"; this man "who has had no experience in the affairs of life"; this man "utterly destitute of knowledge and of foreign diplomacy"; this man "who was elevated for the time being to a conspicuous position because of his debate with Senator Douglas"—was this the man to be intrusted with the Presidency of the United States? Do we of to-day doubt Abraham Lincoln's ability, question his sagacity, or deny his mastery? Why, not one month had he been President of the United States before his cabinet knew that he was master. His Secretary of State, William H. Seward, the foremost statesman of his day, his most conspicuous rival, the man whose eloquence had charmed the Senate, whose knowledge of our foreign relations was world-wide, and whose fame was equally so; Chase, his Secretary of the Treasury, the most conspicuous of the Western antislavery men; his Secretary of War, the most powerful man in Pennsylvania; his Postmaster-general, Mr. Blair, the leader in the border States; his Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, of Connecticut, commanding the support of New England—these men, coming together, assured themselves that if this raw, untrained giant of the West did not know how to run the Government, they could do it for him and keep his head and feet in line! Within a month Mr. Seward informed the President

that the Government had no policy, either domestic or foreign ; and he had taken the liberty to sketch out a paper which he would submit for the President's consideration, and for the execution of which he himself would stand pledged. It proposed to drop out of sight entirely the slavery issue ; it proposed to call France, Spain, and England to a strict account, and, if they gave no satisfactory explanation of their actions, to wage a foreign war in the hope of reuniting the dissevered sections of the country in resolute resistance to foreigners. Mr. Lincoln, who had no knowledge by experience of foreign policy, quietly pocketed that paper and, in terms polite but firm, allowed Mr. Seward to know that the President of the United States, who had sworn to uphold the Constitution and maintain the laws, and whose oath to do it had been taken on the east front of the Capitol, would face the responsibilities of the position for himself.

He was the intellectual master of a cabinet of giants. Read the tributes of the men who did not like him. Read the unwilling admissions wrung from the lips of those who did not at first respect him. Read the tributes from the reluctant pens of critics who subsequently confessed themselves as pigmies in his presence. No doubt can there be as to whose was the ruling mind or whose the master-spirit through those long, dark, dreary years. His intellectual power was, it seems to me, the first and most conspicuous

feature of his greatness. It was a power such as that exercised by John Marshall in jurisprudence, or Isaac Newton in philosophy, when stating a case or presenting a proposition, the statement being in itself not only a vindication of the position assumed, but a logical demonstration of its truth, unalterable, impregnable, and needing no argument for its support. "If this thing is not wrong, there can be nothing which is wrong; if slavery is right, then nothing is right." In these few words he gave expression to a simple, clear, and direct view of the immorality of slavery. He had also an analytical power in which no man was his equal, combined with a calmness and courage which were divine. His patience, his firmness, his tenacity of purpose, the manner in which, after having formulated a proposition in his mind, he would cling to it, constituted the grandest element of strength in the totality of that strange, mysterious combination of incongruous qualities which made up the sublime character which stands accredited to his name.

He combined modesty with patience. "I am the humblest man," he said, "ever called on to fill this office, and yet I have a duty to perform greater than that of any man, not excepting even George Washington." Behold his endurance! We have seen the captain on the bridge of some great ship calmly issue his orders amid the howling of the storm; we have applauded the presence of mind of the general who,



in the storm of battle, coolly surveyed the field, marshalled his troops, or threw his squadrons upon hill-top or into valley to break the weakest line of the enemy ; we have admired the heroism of the engineer who, firing his locomotive, rushed through blazing forests for a distance of miles, to save the lives of his passengers ; we have applauded the skill and celerity of the great commander who traversed ten thousand miles, through tropic seas, and brought his battleship around the Horn in time to share in a critical engagement ; but never was there such agony of endurance or self-possession imposed upon any man in high position as that which was required of the President of the United States from 1861 to 1865. A storm, however violent, in a few hours is over ; a battle in a few days is won ; a run of a few miles takes the engineer beyond the burning forest ; the sea-voyage of ten thousand miles is ended in two months ; but here was a man who, day by day, week by week, month by month, and year by year, bore with herculean shoulders the whole dreadful weight of responsibility, and faced the momentous issues of fate ; a man with a divided party at his back ; with Ben Wade, Thaddeus Stevens, and Henry Winter Davis issuing their flaming manifestoes against him in denunciation because he was not destructive enough or not aggressive enough. The earth opened, as he stood on the very edge of a flaming pit, but his head never reeled nor did his

heart quail ; the sulphurous fumes of that devil's caldron rolled into the air, enveloping this republic in a conflagration such as, thank God, it will never see again ; but far above the vapors of hell the people saw, growing grander and more majestic as it loomed and rose higher and still higher, a firm, calm, sublime, self-regnant soul which, for them as for the black chattels of the South, lived but for the salvation of the Union and the emancipation of the slave ! Beneath pressure from Congress ; with radical editors like Mr. Greeley and Henry Ward Beecher writing bitter editorials which, like mowing-machines, cut at every revolution ; with clamor from office-holders or shrieks of rage from disappointed applicants ; not knowing where he would find absolute support, whether from the radical or conservative wing of his party, Mr. Lincoln clearly perceived, as no other man of his time did perceive, that if he but waited, the plain people (of whom he was the best and most expressive type) would some day come to his support. He knew that the war was one which could not be fought to success by noisy debaters in Congress, nor by the sons of a few rich men leaving their occupations and marching into the field, but that victory must depend upon the voluntary services of boys who, while dedicating themselves to the salvation of the Union, had not yet learned to associate Emancipation with Constitutional Preservation. He knew that he must

sublimely wait. He waited, and the time came. The second call for arms was made when the people were ready to receive it. And then, not from the slums of cities, not from the ooze of social swamps, not from the ranks of the dissolute and the idle, not from hirelings bought by bounty, not from hordes of adventurers, but from mill and factory, from barn and hamlet, from church and school-house, from cross-roads' store and gilded club, from drawing-room and workshop, from mountain-top and valley, from lumber district and iron mine, from granite quarry and marl pit, poured ten thousand confluent streams of gallant "boys in blue," their caps up-tossed to salute the flag, their souls uplifted by devotion to the Union, their eyes glistening with heroic resolution, their quick hearts beating to the music of the charge, while the winds, heavy-laden with the sighs of mothers, the tears of wives, the sobs of sisters, the blessings of fathers, bore down to the listening ears of that great, steadfast, silent, suffering man in the White House, the thunder of their battle-shout, "We are coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more!"

Ah, yes, he was the Father of his people! There's no cant in that. He was the same man whose sympathetic heart could not affirm the death-sentence of a court-martial; the man who revised and modified the action taken under the rules of war by every military body against deserters, spies, boys sleeping on their

posts, or lads delayed on furlough ; the man to whom the loss of a human life was as a personal loss ; the man who oftener set aside judgments of death than did any other human being who ever held a similar position or who was invested with similar power. How many hearts of wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters were gladdened by his merciful interposition ! The officers of the army did not like it. They sent him telegram after telegram, saying, "Do not interfere with our findings ; you are destroying the discipline of the army" ; but his response was, "This is an army of volunteers for the salvation of the Union, and I can not apply to them the rules of the regular service when there are extenuating circumstances." And so, gradually, a realization of the greatness, the mercy, and the goodness of the man extended all over the country. It was from no spirit of superstition, but simply from a child-like recognition of a patent truth that the colored preacher exclaimed, "Massa Lincoln, he know eberyting, he eberywhere ; he walk de earf like de Lord !" Such a tribute from what many might call a benighted mind was the revelation of a universal sentiment.

Some saw in Lincoln simply an idle story-teller, because when other men were grave, he sought to be jocose. I have read many of his alleged stories, and I know that an excellent reason for his habit was given by men who knew him well. The deep-seated melan-

choly in his eyes indicated that the heavily burdened spirit would have broken if it had not had some relief; and when I said that his spirit embodied the woe of Lear and the tragedy of Hamlet, and would have snapped had it not had the humor of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the merriment of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, I uttered a truth well known to those who knew him best. His humor preserved the sanity and the integrity of his mind; or, if Lincoln himself could have expressed it, he was 'always pulling and tugging at the butt-end of a log, or else sitting on the end, whittling for recreation and for rest.' Like Talleyrand, so many stories are credited to him that had he spent the whole of his presidential term and double that length of time in telling stories, the period would not have sufficed for the actual narration of all of them. But he made a plain statement of a case with a story. He evaded responsibility, at a time when responsibility ought not to be assumed, by the same means. When a visitor asked for information which he had no right to expect would be given, instead of having his feelings hurt by an abrupt reply, he would be told a story. When the merchants of New York, alarmed by the exploits of the *Merrimac*, sent their delegation to Washington, their spokesman told the President, "We represent a hundred millions of our own money, we are loyal citizens, we have paid our taxes, and we want you, Mr. President, to send a

gunboat into the harbor of New York in order to protect us from the Merrimac," Mr. Lincoln replied, "Gentlemen, I am the President of the United States, I am the commander of the army and the navy, I can send ships in any direction I please, but at the present time every ship is engaged in some useful service; I do n't actually know where they are; but if I had one-half of your money and were only half as much 'skeered' as you appear to be, I would buy or build a gunboat for myself and present it to the Government."

When that gentle little Quaker lady who had received a revelation from on high that the President ought to emancipate the slave went into the White House and told her story, and told of Deborah and how she interfered in the matter of Sampson, the President queried thus: "You believe that I have been chosen by the Lord to carry on this Government?" "Yes, Mr. President." "Well, if you believe that, why should n't the Lord have revealed my duty to me instead of to you?" When the clergymen of Chicago, drawing themselves up *en masse*, insisted that he should, in response to a revelation from on high, of which they were the God-sent messengers, immediately emancipate the slave, the President said, "Gentlemen, I recognize your mission and your high calling, but, believing that I myself am a servant of the Lord, I am a little at a loss to understand why

He should have chosen such a round-about route as the wicked city of Chicago in order to communicate with me." When a sudden raid was made and a brigadier general and 200 mules were captured by the rebels, Mr. Lincoln remarked, "Well, about that brigadier, I probably could supply his place in five minutes, but as to those mules, they cost us \$200 apiece." When trouble was made over the retirement of one of the members of his Cabinet, and a great difficulty ensued, and finally pressure was exerted to secure the removal of all the remaining members of the Cabinet, he said, "Gentlemen, your request reminds me of that man out in Sangamon County, Ill., who was much troubled with skunks, and he went out with a gun and killed one of them at the wood-pile. When his wife accosted him with 'I thought you were going to shoot that whole lot of skunks,' his answer was, 'Yes, Jane, I went out there, saw five skunks and shot one of them, but the one that I killed made such a 'tarnal smell that I thought I would let the others live.'" When much pressed by an office-seeker who insisted on having recognition, and who, upon being refused, began to abuse the President, Mr. Lincoln, with true dignity, said, "Sir, I can submit to censure, but I will never tolerate insult," and, taking hold of the man with his long, strong hand, promptly ejected him from the room.

These incidents give you but one phase of the

character of the man, and by some they are regarded as showing his characteristics. But place beside them his utterances in State papers. You will search the literature of Presidential proclamations in vain for anything finer in the English tongue, nay, in human speech, than the language of the First Inaugural, or the Gettysburg address, or the Second Inaugural. Indeed, they read like inspired passages from Isaiah or Job. What an exquisite appeal, what a pathetic argument was that which was addressed to our erring Southern brothers: "We are not enemies, we must be friends. The mystic cords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and every patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone in this broad land of ours will swell again the chorus of the Union when touched, as they surely will be, by the better angels of our nature." "Fervently do we hope, fondly do we pray that this cruel scourge of war may pass away; but if that is not to be, if God wills that it should last until all the wealth piled up by the bondsmen's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall have been spent, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall have been paid for by another drop drawn by the sword, still shall it be said, as was said three thousand years ago, the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Believing that the people would sanction his action, and convinced at last that the integrity of the



Union was only to be saved by the gift of freedom to the slave, he made a solemn vow that if the arms of McClellan were crowned with victory at the battle of Antietam, he would bless that achievement by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation; and then, in the rapture of that joyous hour, dipping his pen in the sunlight, he signed his name to that immortal document, which enrolled him among the benefactors of mankind. This was his great, his crowning act—one which for all time will stand alone, like the Constitution of the United States, without a prototype and without a fellow.

The character of Lincoln? Ah, if that can be analyzed, it was his charity, his heartiness, his kindness, his human sympathy, which endeared him to the multitude. But it was his relentless logical power, his clear perception, his grasp of details, his tenacity of purpose, his sense of justice, his loftiness of view, his moral courage,—that magnificent equipoise of conscience, of heart, and of brain,—which lifted him up far above the heads of all other men, and which enabled him to place his country upon a plane so high and safe that the dastards of despotism no longer dared to question the might, the majesty, and the sublimity of freedom.

No voice but that of the archangel can now reach his ear, but his fame and his memory will be preserved and increase from age to age. When un-

seen fingers strike back the bolts which lock out futurity, when this country shall have grown to two hundred millions of people, when one-third of the population of the earth shall speak the English tongue, when the dusky millions of distant islands shall learn to lisp the golden words of liberty, and free institutions are scattering blessings in every clime, then will the name of Lincoln as liberator be on every lip, and nothing but the spaciousness of centuries can fitly frame the grandeur of his fame.



